A HISTORY OF MUNSTER

by

Katherine H. Lorenz

On several occasions during the years the writer has resided in Munster, it has been necessary for me and for others of my acquaintance to look for information on the beginnings and history of the Town. Each time, we have had to run down a variety of elusive sources to obtain the necessary material. With my involvement in a project recently requiring the researching of Munster's early history once again, the time seemed ripe to assemble this scattered material into a factual account of Munster's history. While we make no claim to being a professional historian, we believe the story of Munster will make interesting reading for Munster people.

After studying various accounts of the early years in Munster's history, it is apparent that Ridge Road played a most important part in the development of the area which was to become the Town of Munster. As early as 1837, a way-station or post of some sort stood on the site of what came to be known later as the Old Brass Tavern on the southeast corner of Ridge Road and what is now Columbia Avenue. Ridge Road during the middle of the nineteenth century was called the OLD PIKE. Originally, the section of Columbia Avenue south of Ridge Road was only a field path barred by a wooden gate which later was named the Dyer Road.

In 1855, Ira O Dibble owned the land on the corner of Ridge Road and Columbia Avenue and he built the Inn called the Old Brass Tavern on this site in that year. In 1864, John Frederick Stallbohm purchased the tavern along with 290 acres of farm

land from Ira O. Dibble and occupied it with his family until it burned down in November, 1909. The Stallbohm family operated the Inn as a guest house until the early 1890's when traveling conditions changed so as to make it unprofitable.

We have two accounts of life in the Munster area during the second half of the 19th century; one tells of Munster as a stopping place for transients and traders on their way to Chicago, and one tells of a quiet, farming community serving its own needs and the needs of the area from the produce of its truck gardens. It is only fair that we tell the story of Munster's early days from both points of view as there is no doubt that both ways of life existed with undoubtedly the period of Munster as a traveler's stop-over preceding and then gradually giving way to Munster as an orderly, farming community in the latter part of the 19th century.

Much of the above information and even the working has come from the memoirs of Wihelmine Stallbohm Kaske, the daughter of John F. Stallbohm ("Early Days in Munster," HISTORY OF LAKE COUNTY, Vol. XI, 1934, P.87). Mrs. Kaske lived with her family in the Old Brass Tavern as a child and young girl. It is from her vivd account of her life here that we may derive one of the clearest pictures of life in Munster during this early, transient period.

Mrs. Kaske stated that travel on Ridge Road was as heavy as anywhere in Lake County despite the fact that it was sandy and full of stumps. Columbia Avenue was the only road leading into Chicago and travelers went on foot, horseback, in buggies, wagons, and ox cart. North of Ridge Road, Columbia Avenue was called the old "highway".

The only telegraph office was in the Tavern--a busy, thriving place. While the nearest post office was Gibson, Indiana, most news was bouth in by the transients. (NOTE: Gibson is now the site of the railroad yards of the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad and the New York Central Railroad yards and office building.) World events were discussed in the wine room of the Tavern and people came from many miles to taste the famous wine her father, John F. Stallbohm, made of currants from her mother's lovely garden.

The territory surrounding the Inn was farmland, woods, and marshland with the land to the south rich in quantities of wild hay. Settlement was sparse, of course. Besides running the Tavern, Mrs. Kaske's father raised fine crops of potatoes, corn, oats, and hay.

There was no church at this time but the one-room schoolhouse was near--east of the Tavern on the quarter section line. The teachers lived at the Tavern and the first teacher was Chauncey Wilson. In 1870, the first school was converted to a dwelling and the new school modeled after the pattern of the Old one was erected across the street.

Early neighbors of the Stallbohm family were the Klootwyks, Jabaays, Kooys, Munsters, Dibbles, Wilsons, Johnsons, Grugels, Harts, Van Bodegravens, and Sints. For pleasure, Mrs. Kaske spent many hours riding across the countryside on her horse. Social life was mostly of the visit-the-neighbor type. She describes the Tavern as the social hall stating that infrequent dances were held there. The orchestra was a Mr. Wettering who came out from Chicago with his accordian.

1884 was the year in which Mrs. Kaske was married and left Munster until the year 1905, when she returned to her home town once again.

The story of Munster as a Dutch-American farming community comes to us from an account by William F. Howat, M.D., (A Standard History of Lake County, Indiana, and the Calumet Region", Vol. I, 1915, p.175). Again, we will tell the story of Munster's history in this period in the author's own words insofar as possible.

In the southwestern part of North Township was a street or road (Ridge Road) four miles in length along which resided sixty or seventy families descended from a colony of Dutch Settlers who located here in 1855. The road passed along the low, fertile, and at times partly submerged lands of the Little Calumet bottom and the Cady marsh. (The Cady marsh is located south of Brantwood and east of Hart's Ditch.) The highway and the houses and truck gardens on either side of it with the workers among the growing potatoes, cabbages, onions, parsnips, and flowers, seemed to make a picture lifted bodily out of Holland itself. At the center of this new-world Dutch settlement were a schoolhouse, post office, and a store, all included in the name, Munster. Near that point, the Grand Trunk and the Pennsylvania lines came together and it was the shipping, business, and social center of one of the most industrious, prosperous and unique communitities in Lake County. (The author, obviously, is describing a period late in the 19th and early 20th centuries.)

The founders of this section of the Netherlands in northwestern Indiana were Dingernon Jabaay with his family including three sons; Antonie Bonevman and his son-in-law; Elder

Munster with his two sons, Jacob and Antonie Munster. The Munster family came from Stryen, nine miles from Rotterdam, and the entire colony boarded the ship, "Mississippi", in the summer of 1855 reaching Lake County in August. A little later, Cornelius Klootwyk joined the three families mentioned and together they may be called the pioneers of the Munster settlement. Peter Kooy came in 1857 and other countrymen arrived from year to year until by the late 1870's, there was an almost continous Dutch settlement stretching for more than five miles along the Little Calumet in both Lake and Cook counties. In 1876, a church building was erected near the Illinois state line for the benefit of the Munsterites virtually all of whom were members of the Dutch Reformed Church. It should be noted here that the Illinois-Indiana state line did not serve as much of a divider in this community along Ridge Road--the settlers regarded their communities on both sides of the state line as a unit.

The following statement by a visitor to the region is quoted directly from Dr. Howat's account: "It is a beautiful walk from Lansing, just over the state line, eastward to the schoolhouse with the broad sandridge on the south and the rich Calumet Valley on the north. This land the villagers cultivate raising large crops of vegetables for the city markets. The passing stranger might well call it, A HAPPY VALLEY."

We may now arrive at the conclusion that Munster has passed through two stages of development and is currently in a third stage. In its earliest days, the Town was "a link in the chain" of towns and cities serving travelers and tradesmen in their travels in the Chicago area.

In its second stage, Munster was a Dutch-American farming community located principally along five miles of Ridge Road running in an east-west direction.

Gradually, Munster changed from primarily a farming community into a suburban town which was to become the leading residential community in the area. It is this change and the impetus for it growth which we shall examine now.

Before its incorporation as a Town, Munster was under the government of North Township and the schools of the township were under the supervision of the county superintendent. On June 15, 1907, Charles E. Stallbohm, Jacob Munster, and Gerbrant Kooy, inspectors, met for the purpose of determining whether the Town should be incorporated. The Town was duly declared incorporated by the board of County Commissioners of Lake County, Indiana, on July 1, 1907. The Town's first trustees were elected on July 31, 1907, and were as follows: Jacob Bakker from the first ward, Peter Klootwyk from the second ward, John DeVries from the third ward, and Fred Lange from the fourth ward. These four trustees elected Peter Klootwyk as president of the Town Board, appointed August Richter as the first Town Marshall, and C.P. Schoon as first Town Clerk. The Town these men governed was approximately 7.5 square miles in size and contained 4,736 acres of land. The first recorded population figure for Munster was in 1910 and the population at that time was recorded as 543 residents.

In the following two decades, a gradual increase ensued. The slow but steady growth and conservatism of the Town's leaders in these early years are among the reasons we now have the desirable community we enjoy today.

One of the main reasons for Munster's growth and change from primarily a farming community into a residential town lies in the fact of its location. Munster is located immediately south of the City of Hammond, Indiana, in the heart of the Calumet Region of the Greater Chicago Metropolitan Area. It s residents are managers and workers for financial, educational and institutional firms, and in the tremendous steel and oil industries of Chicago and cities of Northern Indiana. Many of the remainder are the owners and workers in the small and medium-sized business activities of the Calumet Region. A high percentage of professional men such as doctors and lawyers also reside in Munster.

During the first part of this century, Lake County underwent tremendous industrial growth in the steel and oil industries along with other areas of manufacturing. This development encouraged a migration from other parts of the country and the world to Lake County. From a population of 543 in 1910, there was a gradual increase during the next two decades until 1930 when the population reached 975.

The smallest building period in Munster's history was between 1862--1924 when only 34 homes were built in 64 years. By the year, 1940, munster's population had risen to 1,751 residents increasing to 4,753 by 1950. The 1940-50 decade showed an increase of 3,002 residents, or 171.5 per cent over the census figure listed at the close of the previous ten-year period.

It was immediately following World War II that the cities to the north of Munster began reaching a saturation point. As a consequence, residential construction for the industrial districts

developed a southward trend reaching into and well beyond the Town of Munster. After 1950, the growth in population was steady until the last few years when we once again appear to be in a stage of rapid growth.

Many of the above figures were taken from the Purdue survey conducted for the School Town of Munster in 1957. From this same survey, other interesting facts may be elicited. Of the 2,243 families interviewed, 10.7 percent had lived in Munster less than one year while 46.5 percent of the families had lived here four years or less. These figures indicated a community with the majority of its residents new to the area. Of these new residents, 4.1 per cent were native families, 70.6 per cent moved to Munster from other sections of Indiana, and 17.9 per cent came from Illinois. With the freedom of a new community unfettered by tradition comes a great responsibility in its development. To date, our Town has been intelligently developed on the whole and it is up to us to continue to plan for orderly growth.

1962